

Free to garden

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By Kathy Hedberg of the Tribune

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OROFINO - Inside the double wire fence topped with coils of razor-sharp concertina wire at Idaho State Correctional Institution here, lies a pleasing oasis that is bulging this time of year with the fruits of the labor of inmates.

For the seventh year in a row, a robust garden managed and tended by inmates has been producing fresh fruits and vegetables to supplant the otherwise ordinary diet of the nearly 570 minimum, medium and protective custody inmates here.

"They do this more for pride," said Margaret Hight, the food services supervisor at the prison. "They're outside; they're working and they produce an absolutely wonderful product."

The garden started about seven years ago as collaboration between prison staff and the inmates. Those who are allowed to work in the garden are carefully screened for escape risk and then apply for the job, for which they're paid about 30 cents an hour.

In the beginning, said Andy Barnes, a food service officer who has been helping with the garden since it started, there were only a few tomato and pepper plants.

Now the garden takes up almost the entire front yard of the prison, trailing around the side of a dormitory and partway around the back. Squashes, tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, watermelons, cantaloupes, flowers and herbs are lined in tidy, nearly weed-free rows. Each day three to four inmates spend as many as 10 hours tending the plants and harvesting the bounty.

"The first year, there were 30 tomato plants and 30 pepper plants," Barnes said. "That was the garden; just a teeny section along the walk.

"One year it got up to over 1,000 peppers and 1,000 tomatoes, but that got cut back because they were so close and for security reasons you had to be able to see into the garden. So they've cut it back a lot."

This year, Barnes said, there are about 4,000 garlic plants, which have been used to flavor the spaghetti sauce and garlic bread the inmates prepare for dinner.

Warden Terema Carlin said the garden has not only saved about \$40,000 a year in food service costs, but nearly all the seeds and bedding plants have been collected and germinated by the prison work team or donated from local nurseries. Garden tools and other implements also have been crafted on the grounds or donated. Other than the cost for a little fertilizer there is no additional expense to the state taxpayers, the warden said.

"We started small and it felt like this would be a good program and supplement our budget for our food service," Carlin said, "because budgets for food service are always one of those areas that are sensitive. We can't control the cost of food, so it's really hard sometimes to forecast what the right budget is going to be."

As with everything involved in the prison system, security is a primary concern with the garden.

Carlin said staff members do an inventory every morning of the tools that are allocated to the inmates working in the garden and all those implements must be accounted for by the end of the day. Plants are kept to minimum height so that people cannot hide behind them.

But overall security has not been a big problem with the garden.

"What's come out is they've taken a lot of ownership and pride in this project," Carlin said. "In the beginning we had a couple of offenders that kind of abused it, but since then, as long as you find the guys that are really serious about it and really want to learn more, man, they just flourish.

"They take a lot of pride and it keeps them out of trouble in the housing unit because they're out here most of the day. They know that this could be taken away from them and it's a privilege for them. I'm surprised they don't sing to the plants because they really do love them."

Joe Garren of Missoula, Mont., is an inmate who has been working in the garden for about two months.

"I love it," Garren said, taking a short break from weeding between squash plants. "I've been a farmer all my life, but nothing to this extreme. I know a little bit; I've learned a lot since I've been here. I learned from the guys who worked here."

Besides contributing to the menus at the prison Garren said his time spent in the garden helps him pass the days in prison more easily.

"It keeps me productive," he said. "You get healthy, you get to be productive and, of course, you get to contribute to the things that we eat as inmates."

One of the earlier challenges came about after a couple of inmates questioned the use of chemical pesticides and herbicides that were being used at the time. Barnes said to avoid lawsuits, the prison converted to a strictly organic system and have been assisted by staff at Green Things Nursery in Orofino. Now any inmate who questions what products are used on garden plants can be assured that everything passes chemical-free inspection.

And even though many inmates who have been in a number of institutions have told her that the food in the Orofino prison is the best, Hight said she still gets a little pushback when she does something creative, such as adding chopped basil to the potatoes and roast beef.

"And then you always get someone who says, 'There's something wrong with this - there's green stuff in it,' " she said. "But then you tell them what it is and they're all happy. So we kind of laugh because I already tasted them and I know they're good."

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